

Perhaps some of you, at some point in time, have heard the 11th Commandment. It goes something like this, “Thou shalt not make any changes in the way we do things around here.” Or, similar words like, “But, we have always done it this way before!” Quite honestly, when this 11th Commandment is observed, when conventional thought and action are never challenged, when we are not open to being changed and being made new, there is hardly ever any growth.

As we hear the Jesus story we know that throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, he continually challenged conventional religious structures, religious thinking and religious practices. And, the example in today’s gospel lesson is no exception. Jesus’ words in today’s reading not only challenge us, they are also disturbing.

As this gospel reading begins, Jesus is speaking to the crowd about tradition and conventional religious practices. He is speaking to all who hold tradition and ritual in high esteem and consider themselves to be the “in crowd” – the socially accepted crowd. This was a community preoccupied with dietary laws about what would defile and hurt the body, laws that dictated what could and could not be touched or eaten. Jesus has just confronted the people about their exclusionary practices, their clean

and unclean requirements and, he has just turned conventional thinking on its head. He challenges the people regarding the importance of their strict dietary laws that place a high premium on the purity of the individual. You see, Jesus is much more concerned about the heart and the stuff that comes out of us as we live in relationship to others. He is concerned about the stuff that can defile, hurting others and hurting the world. Theologian, Dock Hollingsworth, describes what Jesus is saying in this way:

Yesterday's lunch is gone forever. Jesus asks, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes into the sewer?" It is a crude image. The sewer has carried away any mistakes we may have made by putting into our body things that the dietary laws call unclean. However, the careless words, the evil, the lies, and the fornication continue to be harmful. Our words and actions have the power to defile and hurt and the pain of those choices is **not** washed down the sewer like yesterday's lunch (p. 357, Feasting on the Word).

By confronting the people about their exclusionary practices, their clean and unclean issues and requirements, Jesus has just turned conventional religious thought on its head. And, I think he turns much of our conventional religious thought on its head as well.

Throughout history there have been many times when the church has used tradition in perverse ways. In light of Jesus' words to us today, we should ask ourselves, what practices do we hold dear? What really doesn't matter? What traditions do we deem so vitally important they end up

excluding others? How does the way in which we do this thing called church tend to push people away? The truth is, some of our practices and traditions really are not that important. Jesus' words remind us that religious faithfulness is ultimately shown by the way we speak and live out the radical hospitality and love of Christ as we live in relationship to others. What is so captivating about today's reading is that Jesus challenges and disturbs the religious community about their "clean" and "unclean" status, and then finds himself in a position where the tables are turned and he is confronted by a clean/unclean issue. Quite frankly, we see him acting in a manner that is very uncomfortable, disconcerting and truly painful to watch.

Jesus travels into Gentile territory and is approached by a very bold, in your face Canaanite woman. She is a foreigner and tradition labels her unclean. She confronts Jesus, asking him to heal her demon possessed daughter. And, Jesus' actions and words to her seem arrogant, racist, and just plain mean. First, he ignores her and then he insults her by using an ethnic slur, calling her a dog. I don't like this side of Jesus. His words are degrading. Yet, I think we need to wrestle with this story. There is nothing we can or should do to water it down except honestly face Jesus' response. Is it just possible that we see a greater glimpse of Jesus' humanity in this story? I think that for most of us, we say we believe Jesus was "truly

human” but, we do not want him to be too human. The fact of the matter is the gospel writer does not clean up this story. Instead, he shows us a very human side of Jesus. Pastor Gary Charles, when describing this scene writes:

Jesus enters into “unwashed” territory of untouchable foreigners, a despised “toxic waste area.” Jewish religious tradition had “proven to be a ‘holy’ fence” for these foreigners, keeping them on the outside. And, not only is this woman an unclean foreigner, she is doubly despised because she is a woman.

Jesus’ initial actions and disturbing words to this bold woman are descriptive of conventional religious thinking within the Jewish community of that time. And, we must wrestle with something. Does Jesus respond out of his humanity and the socialization he has experienced throughout his thirty some years of life? Can we see him as fully human in his response? Is he so fully human that this very bold woman who approaches him and is **not** willing to back down ends up **changing him** and his own thinking and understanding of his mission in this world? Most scholars think this to be the case. Furthermore, the writer of Matthew’s gospel is telling the Jesus story to a Jewish community that wanted to exclude foreigners and Gentiles, all those they considered “other.” It is quite likely the audience Matthew’s Jesus is addressing had some growing up to do and this bold, in your face, unclean foreign woman enabled that.

This bold woman, an enemy of Israel, who is not willing to give up and go away has faith, **great faith**. **She** ministers to Jesus and, in doing so, becomes a voice from beyond the boundaries. Jesus recognizes her faith, and her bold action is instrumental in bringing about divine healing and the release of God's grace for the "others" in this world. From this point on in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' mission continues to become larger, expanding to the point that it includes the whole world.

We who make up the body of Christ need to always be struggling with the questions we discover in today's reading. We must ask:

- What does it mean for us to follow Jesus into the "toxic waste areas" of the world?
- What does this mean as we address the evil of racism in our country and ourselves, and respond to the horror we have witnessed over the past week?
- What does it mean for us to fret less about how "we have always done it this way" and listen more to the cries of those tradition considers "unclean" or "unwanted"?
- How have we let our "traditions" become external barriers, blocking access to the overwhelming grace of God?

Jesus was changed that day! Can we also change, be continually changed and made new? Are we as willing to be more welcoming to those who are different, those we consider the "others" in this world? Can we allow our conventional religious perspectives to be changed so God's grace can become more fully realized in this world?

The promises of God are true and God's mercy is for **all**. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we discover God deeply loves this **entire** world in all its brokenness. And, as Pastor Charles says, we should "never tire in giving thanks that, in Jesus, God's covenant promises stretch the length of the cross for **all** nations and **all** people."